



**Deaf Services Commission of Iowa**

**Iowa Department of Human Rights**

# **Critical Issues Facing Iowa's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Communities**

**November 2007**





## **Introduction**

The historical isolation of people who are deaf or hard of hearing has impeded their full inclusion in our workplaces and our communities. Approximately 65 percent of people who are deaf or hard of hearing live in poverty. Effective access to services and civic involvement is virtually impossible without the means to communicate. The result is that people who are deaf or hard of hearing live in a world of frequent misunderstanding and miscommunication. The lack of accurate communication puts them at serious risk of harm in many situations. Deaf and hard of hearing people are especially fearful when understanding English is critical to decision making about employment rights, medical, legal, and financial interests.

**Deaf Services Commission of Iowa has identified the following critical issues facing deaf and hard of hearing citizens in the state of Iowa:**

- **No culturally affirmative mental health services**
- **No culturally affirmative substance abuse education and aftercare services**
- **Difficulty finding legal representation that is accessible**
- **Limited access to information and services through the use of technology**
- **Minimal number of licensed sign language interpreters meeting competency standards**
- **Lack of opportunities for youth to prepare for employment and adult life**
- **Limited services that specifically address issues for those who lose their hearing later in life**

## **Culturally Affirmative Mental Health Services**

When deaf and hard of hearing people need mental health support, they are often confronted with services that are not accessible or even non-existent. Issues such as language differences and cultural and communication barriers prevent these individuals from accessing services. Nationally, experts urge the establishment of culturally affirmative mental health services for people with a hearing loss. The Division of Deaf Services conducted a survey in October of 2005 with the Iowa Mental Health Counselors Association (IMHCA) asking for information about serving patients who are deaf. Responses from this survey expressed concerns with provider skills in working with this population, little or lack of experience with deaf culture, and the cost of interpreting services.

“With the national prevalence of hearing loss at 8.6%, there is no mental health system, rural or urban, that is immune from serving deaf and hard of hearing people. The low numbers of deaf clients actually seeking services, however, may lead administrators to believe that the needs of this population are being met, or that there is not a major problem to address. Although the mental health needs of deaf persons are similar to the general population, it is estimated that only between two percent and ten percent of

deaf persons who have mental health needs actually receive services.” (Bush, Dreyzehner, Smith, and Taylor, 2002) The majority of deaf and hard of hearing individuals site mistrust in providers, concerns with communication in therapy, and lack of knowledge on services available as reasons for not seeking mental health services. Most tend to seek services only in crisis and share experiences of not being able to access services when needed due to communication barriers.

### **Culturally Affirmative Substance Abuse Education and Aftercare Services**

Initially there is a lack of awareness about substance abuse in the deaf and hard of hearing community. Many individuals have not had access to the widespread, public efforts to educate about the dangers of drug and alcohol use. Like other linguistic/cultural minority groups, the deaf and hard of hearing community lack information in their native language, include alcohol as a part of social activities, and those with abuse issues are reluctant to admit to problems in a small community. We have been fortunate in Iowa to establish a cooperative relationship with the Department of Human Services, Vocational Rehabilitation, and private insurers to approve funding for treatment in a specialized program in Minnesota. However, the issue of support for these individuals when treatment is complete and they return to Iowa is a major issue. Aftercare is the greatest obstacle in assisting deaf and hard of hearing Iowans to maintain sobriety and improve their quality of life. This is especially true when sobriety is a fundamental requirement to maintaining parental custody or parole status.

### **Accessible Legal Representation**

It is virtually impossible to get through life without needing legal representation. Yet hundreds of Iowans who are deaf and hard of hearing find it nearly impossible to find lawyers who are willing to take their cases or provide accessibility. Agencies serving this population attempt to make referrals but are often faced with attorneys who are hesitant or not prepared to work with people who have a communication disability. Deaf and hard of hearing citizens share their frustrations of lawyer after lawyer declining their requests for services. Iowa lacks education and counseling for legal service providers to foster effective legal representation. In addition, there are no advocacy and education services for deaf and hard of hearing citizens on how to successfully access legal representation.

### **Access to Information and Services Through the Use of Technology**

Today, one thing that deaf and hard of hearing people agree on is that technology has the power to provide greater accessibility, to level the playing field, and to maximize the quality of their lives. For almost one hundred years after its invention, the telephone separated deaf and hard of hearing people from the rest of society. In recent years videophones have become the true equalizer for people who are deaf. This new video technology offers the opportunity to communicate in their native language of American Sign Language with anyone, anywhere. Many Iowans have indicated that they no longer contact the Division of Deaf Services in the Iowa Department of Human Rights because the agency is inaccessible by videophone.

Studies show that 80% of what we learn was not taught but acquired incidentally from listening to television, radio, and others' conversations. For someone with a hearing loss, an inability to access incidental information can be a major deficit. In addition, people who can hear process information most readily using an auditory process. For those who are deaf, information acquisition is a visual process. Providing information in American Sign Language via video and web video will bridge the gap in incidental learning to those who are deaf and hard of hearing. Critical information about healthcare, employment services, safety, community opportunities, etc. can be shared with a large audience in an expedient and inexpensive manner via web and video technology.

Consumers are faced daily with decisions about what the best product to purchase is. For those who experience a hearing loss, this can be even more daunting. Most assistive technology is purchased by catalog or website. Consumers are faced with the difficult decision of reading a description of equipment and guessing if it will meet their needs. For many of these people, their hearing loss is new or progressively changes. These factors severely limit their ability to make judicious purchases.

### **Licensed Sign Language Interpreters Meeting Competency Standards**

The Bureau of Professional Licensure in the Department of Public Health licenses individuals to provide sign language interpreting services in Iowa. As of June 2007 there were 307 interpreters licensed in Iowa. Of those, 247 or 80% had not passed an examination required for licensure and held a temporary license valid for two years. The majority of these interpreters are employed by educational institutions in Iowa. There is great concern among educators and parents that these interpreters have opportunities to improve their skills and meet the minimum state standards by passing an examination. The Division of Deaf Services is collaborating with the Iowa Department of Education, the Iowa School for the Deaf, the interpreter education programs at Iowa's Community Colleges, and the Iowa State Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf to address this issue. The collaboration group has researched existing programs in other states, data from those taking examinations but not meeting the minimum standard, and surveys of working interpreters. The collaboration group recommends that Iowa implement a mentoring program and offer regular educational opportunities for sign language interpreters.

### **Opportunities for Youth to Prepare for Employment and Adult Life**

The Clerc Center at Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C., was charged by the Congress of the United States "to establish and publish priorities" as it relates to the Education of the Deaf Act Amendments of 1998. Gallaudet's report "Identifying Critical Needs in School-to-Work Transition" published in 2002 identifies several critical transition needs of deaf and hard of hearing students. Critical needs identified include: work-based learning, goal setting, self-advocacy, special needs of deaf and hard of

hearing youth, staff with specialized training and deaf role models, and transition planning.

The Division of Deaf Services, Iowa Department of Human Rights, has provided limited youth leadership/transition programming. This program has been a collaborative effort between the division, other state agencies, and Sertoma Clubs in Iowa. Some of the critical needs identified above have been addressed through this program with great success. More than 80% of students participating in this program continue on to post-secondary education. Despite the collaboration, in FY08 this program was reduced to a week-long program due to on-going cuts in state funding. Beyond this program there are limited opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing students that impact their success seeking post-secondary training and education and in turn reduce these individuals' lifetime earning potential.

### **Services that Specifically Address Issues for Those Who Lose Their Hearing Later in Life**

The Hearing Loss Association of America reports, "One in every ten (28 million) Americans has hearing loss. As baby boomers reach retirement age starting in 2010, this number is expected to rapidly climb and nearly double by the year 2030. The prevalence of hearing loss increases with age, up to 1 in 3 over age 65. Among seniors, hearing loss is the third most prevalent, but treatable disabling condition, behind arthritis and hypertension." In Iowa these figures can be extrapolated to show that 298,209 Iowans experience a hearing loss. It further shows that of Iowans over the age of 65, approximately 145,219 experience a hearing loss. The Division of Deaf Services, Iowa Department of Human Rights, is not able to meet the growing needs of Iowans who experience a hearing loss with existing resources. Hard of hearing Iowans have asked for services that include education, outreach, information and technical assistance to individuals who are hard of hearing and late deafened.

### **For More Information Contact:**

Deaf Services Commission of Iowa  
Iowa Department of Human Rights  
Lucas State Office Building, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Des Moines, IA 50319  
515-281-3164 tty/voice  
Toll Free 1-888-221-3724 tty/voice  
Email: dhr.dsci@iowa.gov